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AUTHOR Wang, Min min
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ABSTRACT

A proposal for introducing basic communication courses into China's foreign language curriculum argues that it is a change needed to meet the new objectives of foreign language teaching in that country. Four suggestions for a smooth transition include: (1) basing the communication courses on what already exists in the curriculum; (2) using a large lecture plus small performance class as a major form of course organization; (3) obtaining good textbooks, including programmed-instruction books to make good use of high Chinese student motivation; and (4) establishing and keeping a research orientation from the outset. Cultural issues that might affect the introduction of communication courses are discussed, including the relative emphasis on American culture, characteristic Chinese student behavior, and the need for special textbooks. (Author/MSE)

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Min min Wang
Dr. Richard L. Weaver II
IPCO 729
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On Introducing Basic Communication Courses into China's Foreign Language Curriculum

Abstract

The paper is a proposal for introducing basic-communication courses into China's foreign-language curriculum. It asserts that this introduction is a highly needed change required by the changed goal of foreign language teaching in China. To ensure a smooth change, four suggestions are put forward: (1)to base the communication courses on what already exists in the curriculum, (2)to use large lecture plus small performance class as a major form of organization, (3)to obtain good textbooks, and (4)to keep a research orientation from the very beginning. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the cultural differences that might affect the introduction. (103 words)

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On Introducing Basic Communication Courses into China's Foreign Language Curriculum

In recent years there has been much discussion about the necessary changes in China's foreign-language teaching (e.g., Maley 1984; and Gao 1985). Various approaches have been suggested to replace or reconcile approaches currently in use in China. There is now fairly broad agreement that a language education curriculum should focus on developing the learner's "communicative" competence, instead of the purely "linguistic" competence emphasized by the current curriculum (Gao 1985; and Shen 1985). However, there have been different interpretations of the "communicative" competence proposed, and there have been various degrees of changes suggested.

In this paper, I shall propose that genuine communicative competence consists of two major components: 1) the ability to use linguistic routines, including words, phrases, sentences and even larger units, correctly and automatically, and 2) the ability to engage in the process of negotiating meanings in real communicative situations. A foreign-language curriculum, therefore, should take into consideration not only the end products, i.e., the linguistic forms and

rules acquired by learners, but also the process, i.e., learning (or rather practicing) the negotiation of meanings in context. Viewed in this light, a sound foreign-language curriculum should integrate basic-communication courses with basic-language training. The paper is divided into three sections: 1) the necessity of introducing basic-speech-communication courses into China's foreign-language curriculum; 2) strategies of implementation of this introduction; and 3) major concerns.

Necessity

For many years in China, a purely linguistic, scholastic approach has been used in foreign-language teaching because few people actually felt the need to use these languages for real communication until fairly recently. With the implementation of the policy of opening to the outside world since the late 1970s, a need for a functional command of English and other foreign languages in the fields of industry, science and technology, commerce, and tourism has been created. Such a need calls for a corresponding change in the curriculum design as well as methodology, giving rise to the necessity of introducing basic-communication courses into the curriculum.

Before I proceed to discuss the necessary introduction of these courses, I would like to give a brief overview of China's dominant approaches in foreign-language teaching. English is taken as a typical example in the field.

English language curriculum design in China has been based mainly

on the designer's understanding of the language, often in linguistic terms (Gao 1985). Not much attention has been paid to the learner, the learning process, and the learning environment in which the target language is taught. In much the same way, not enough emphasis has been put on the purposeful, interational, sharing and negotiating features of language as communication although communication, or teaching how to communicate, has been claimed to be the goal. At the present stage, "most teaching in China could be labelled grammar-translation, direct method or structuro- audio-lingual"(Maley 1984). All these approaches try to teach linguistic units at one level or another, for written or for oral purposes. A typical course offered in many Chinese universities is called the "intensive reading" course, a general purpose course which combines a reading passage, word study, intensive vocabulary drills, grammar notes and exercises, questions and answers about the reading passage, as well as oral practice. Although the declared goal of the course is to train the four language skills--reading, listening, speaking, and writing, its principal emphasis is on linguistic accuracy (Shen 1985). Most "intensive reading" teachers follow the procedure established in the 1960s: after checking students on the content of a text as well as the vocabulary, teachers go through the text following the teaching notes. They clarify language points and supply further examples of new expressions involved. Then the students are led to do the oral and written exercises accompanying the text (Gao 1985). This course has worked well within the traditional education framework because reading and memorization play an important role.

Students are clear about what they are expected to learn, and what they will be examined on, and motivation is usually great for students to fulfil the expectations and score high on the examinations. Nevertheless, defects inherent in this reading course, as in the whole approach, are obvious: 1) its strong emphasis on the language as linguistic units rather than as language use, 2) its heavy dependence on memorization and accuracy at the expense of appropriacy and fluency, 3) its emphasis on passive learning from texts and teaching notes instead of actively eliciting imagination and creativity from the students, and 4)its teacher-centered orientation to the negligence of student variance in learning styles and personalities. These defects have become all the more crippling when the goal of language education has shifted to communicative competence in recent years.

One necessary change agreed on by most foreign-language teachers and administrators is to re-focus the curriculum on language as communication. Much discussion has gone into ways to introduce the so-called communicative approach into China's foreign-language teaching. This approach, by definition, aims at helping learners acquire or increase their communicative competence. There seems to be some consensus, theoretically, on what constitutes this competence in language users. Canale and Swain(1980) identify four major strands comprising communicative competence: 1) grammatical competence, 2) sociolinguistic competence, 3) discourse competence, and 4) strategic competence. But differences arise when it comes to interpret them in pedagogic terms. For example, the functional-notional syllabus, much in

vogue in Europe in the last decade, advocates an integrated curriculum covering a list of functions and notions, ranging from expressing thanks or apologies to how to ask for a favor or make a demand. Grammatical structures and vocabulary items are incorporated into the learning of functions and notions, while appropriateness dependent on interrelationship and social situation, and even nonverbal communication are discussed and practiced in class. In spite of difficulties in presenting the integrated materials, the syllabus has certain advantages over the earlier approaches. One problem that the syllabus has failed to address, however, is how the learner is to be helped to learn the process of negotiating meanings in real situations. Its opponents point out that the integrated lessons designed to foster learning of functions or notions are not much different from traditional reading courses, for the emphasis is still laid on the end products, i.e., on what the students ought to acquire after so many hours of study. The substitution of functional items for grammatical ones, the opponents assert, does not change the nature of the foreign-language classroom; it is still a drilling ground. What is urgently needed, according to them, is to teach the student the process of negotiating meanings in real life, and that can only be realized when the teaching and learning process involves real communication so that the student is able to learn how to discover meanings from any message delivered.

In my opinion, the four strands of communicative competence can be categorized as two major components: neither can be ignored in a

foreign-language curriculum. The first, what has been called the grammatical competence, is what native speakers develop before they reach five or six. The second, the other three strands identified in the previous paragraph, is what native speakers learn not only when they learn the language, but also through experience and practice for the rest of their lives. We know that linguists have believed that native speakers acquire the language effortlessly, while communication specialists have observed that not all native speakers good communicators. It is probably a difference of emphasis, a difference of perspective, but it brings out the fact that when we communicate we make use of two kinds of competence. For native speakers, the first competence is naturally acquired, but for foreign-language learners, both kinds have to be learned. Widdowson(1983) examines the communicative approach in its operation. This forerunner of the approach redefines the components of communicative competence in pedagogic terms. He sees it as composed of a set of linguistic routines developed by language users in connection with various situations("frames") and a set of procedures of negotiating meanings in real life. Any adequate curriculum for teaching a foreign language should address both. For the first set, drill and practice of both linguistic and functional items are in order, while for the second, basic communication courses offer good possibilities.

The necessity of introducing these courses can be viewed from the following angles:

1. These courses emphasize language use and propriety in

communication. They are necessary for learners of a foreign language to go beyond mere "good grammar."

2. As communication courses, they favor fluency-oriented activities. Attention is paid to communication tasks to be achieved through the language rather than exercises on the language. They are necessary for teachers who want to teach their students processes of negotiating meanings in various situations.

3. As courses first designed to improve native-speakers' ability to communicate effectively, they incorporate into their lessons a great amount of culture. An awareness of cultural differences has always been deemed a necessity for foreign-language learners.

4. As courses emphasizing improvement on the basis of learners' abilities, they are sensitive to learners' differences. They are necessary to pool learners' imagination and creativity and create a learner-centered, process-oriented learning environment.

Strategies of Implementation

The introduction of basic communication courses into a foreign-language curriculum means a change of a fundamental nature. As all changes in education go, the most important factor that will decide whether it will succeed or fail is the human factor--how will it be received by teachers and students. Therefore, before we go on to discuss strategies of implementation, let us examine the characteristics of Chinese teachers and students who would be involved in this change.

Chinese students are in general highly motivated. They are both industrious to the point of excess, and punctilious in the execution of work requested from them. As Sampson (1985) remarks, they have been taught from a very young age to take the teacher as one model and the text as another. They tend to demand very firm leadership from their teachers and expect to be told exactly what to do at every step of the way, and they are insecure in the situations demanding language fluency (Maley 1985). On the other hand, memorization is the central process of Chinese education, as is mandated by the writing system itself. According to Matalene, for them, " the fourth art of rhetoric, memory, the one we ignore, is and always has been more important than any other. It also informs the other arts of invention, arrangement, and style in ways that are not immediately apparent" (1985, p.789).

Chinese teachers, with the historical parental role in education, are conscientious about their work and care about their students. They will go to a great deal of trouble to seek ways they can to help their students, including individual coaching or even home visits. Moreover, there has developed in the last few decades a collective working system where the teachers co-operate with their colleagues to solve problems they encounter in class. However, they are strongly oriented towards accurate teaching, with a heavy emphasis on grammar and vocabulary learning. The reason might be that most teachers have learned their English in China, through intensive reading or similar courses. They are frequently insecure about their use of the language they are teaching. Paradoxically, this often leads to dogmatic views in language

and authoritarian practice in class. Maley (1985) describes it as a situation where "nothing happens which is not initiated and controlled by the teacher."

These characteristics can be both conducive and obstructional to the implementation of the proposed integration of basic-communication courses into a foreign-language curriculum. The best strategies will be those that make the best use of the conducive factors while avoiding aggravating such factors as might be obstructional. Some concrete suggestions follow:

1. Link proposed basic-communication courses with what has traditionally existed in the curriculum:

This is to reduce resistance on the part of educational administrators and teachers, and also to achieve real integration and avoid conflicting interests. Unlike communication courses for native speakers, the courses I propose will gradually build up on the basis of what the students have learned in their language classes. This means a slower rate of progress, a less theoretical orientation, and a greater variety of activities in class. For example, active listening can be introduced as a semester course linked with aural comprehension practice in language training. Interpersonal communication can be taught for one or two semesters, in conjunction with functions such as asking for permission, making demands, and asking or providing information. Group communication can be taken as a semester course at a more advanced stage when the students have developed some abilities to seek and exchange information. This is especially useful for those

students who are thinking of doing their advanced studies abroad. Public communication and a course in communication theory are both possible courses to be taken optionally by students interested in communication studies or having some plan for getting teaching assistantships in other countries. Group communication may be based on such task-oriented activities as problem-solving and special-subject panels. Public speech, on the other hand, can find materials in many intensive reading textbooks to start discussion.

2. Use large lecture plus small performance class as a major form of the courses proposed.

This is to guarantee the quality of the course and help Chinese teachers build up their confidence and sense of security. The lecturer should be well selected, preferably a native-communication specialist. Lecturers, thus selected, will specify their intention in a personalized teacher's manual (PTM, cf. Weaver 1986). The Chinese teachers can be graduate assistants or regular teachers, who in this case will be charged with directing small-performance classes with full instructions from the lecturer. On one hand, their conscientiousness and care will be utilized while, on the other hand, they will have less anxiety meeting their classes.

3. Obtain good textbooks, including programmed-instruction textbooks for students exercises:

This is to make full use of the characteristic industriousness and high motivation of Chinese students. The best choice would be one that is locked step by step with the lectures (cf. Weaver 1978). The

students may follow a programmed-instruction textbook in small groups in or even after class. Their tendency to memorize may also be utilized to learn concepts and models so long as exercises practicing them are done properly.

At the beginning, it might be necessary to use textbooks compiled for native speakers. They are likely to be less suitable than well-edited and well-substantiated books compiled especially for foreign-language learners. This is a problem I shall discuss in the next section.

4. Keep a research orientation from the beginning:

This is to constantly improve the course, increase students' interest, and enrich communication theories. Research can be conducted along two lines: cultural and pedagogic. Along the first line, class activities can gradually move in the direction of investigating and exploring cultural differences in communication patterns as taught in textbooks or lectures and observed in Chinese social contexts. This will help improve the course and will enrich activities in class. Then, along the second line, data may be accumulated as to the effectiveness of the courses and of individual activities so that constant improvement can occur. Both will contribute to the development of communication theories and to the enhancement of communication education.

Some Major Concerns

The last strategy in the last section, maintain a research

orientation, will arise from a concern with different communication patterns in different cultures. The strategies discussed earlier reflect the universal nature of human communication. But as one of the most important social activities, communication varies greatly from culture to culture. These variations are important elements with which we should concern ourselves both theoretically and pedagogically.

Numerous studies have been done on the differences between American and Chinese cultures and their value systems (Fairbank 1968; Matalene 1985; and Sampson 1985). For example, the concept of the individual self is an integral assumption of American culture, so deeply ingrained that Americans ordinarily do not question it (Stewart 1980, p.68). There is always a separation of me from the other: this "other" may be nature, or society, or technology, or the system. The constant concern of an American is to keep the identity of the individual--you must be different, must be assertive, and must have your rights, your space, your emotions, and even your own weaknesses--all this against the unifying force of the "other." Naturally, in communication studies, such principles as "to be direct," "to be assertive," "to be open," and "to self-disclose" are taken for granted; the problem is always "how' to achieve them, never "why" they should be achieved. Things are quite different in the Chinese culture.

Chinese culture has never emphasized the individual self. People do not exist to realize themselves but to fulfil their obligations, traditionally, first to the family, and then to the state, and in the current political system, first to the state and then to the family.

Fairbank (1968) describes China as the stronghold of the family system, deriving both strength and inertia from it. He continues:

> The Chinese family has been a microcosm, the state in miniature. The family, not the individual, has been the social unit and the responsible element in the political life of its locality. The filial piety and obedience inculcated in family life have been the training ground for loyalty to the ruler and obedience to constituted authority in the state. (30)

This does not mean that the Chinese do not have their individual desires, emotions, and weaknesses. The social norm is to suppress or restrain them. Confucianism advocates everyday self-examination to check if one's behavior has deviated from the li, the doctrines of appropriate behavior. In decision-making, Americans would probably ask themselves "What do I want?" and decide accordingly. The Chinese, on the other hand, would ask "What ought I to do?" and often act according to what others (peers, colleagues, or superiors) expect them to do. As a result, what concerns the Chinese most is to not lose their membership in a group--they must not be different, must not be noisy, must do their duty, contain their emotions and not let their weaknesses show. It is obvious that the principles described in the previous paragraphs are not universal, at least are not what apply to communication in China. Natalene (1985) comments on what she found while teaching composition in China:

> The Chinese practice of social indirection is even harder for us to understand given our natural behavioral mode of

> making direct requests, offering direct responses, and generally making our thoughts and feeling known. We are constantly seen by the Chinese as rude, aggressive, and ill-mannered. Just as a poem requires interpretation, so does a gesture or a statement; therefore, it need not and should not be explicit. One can assume that one's audience will get the point--unless, of course, you are barbarians. (802)

Sometimes even the same concept may imply different signification. The contribution of nonverbal communication is a universal phenomenon, and of this eye contact is admittedly an important component. Now, in America, direct eye contact is important, for it usually tells your conversational partner that you are honest and open. But in other cultures, i.e., in China, it is inappropriate to keep direct eye contact for long.

The differences in culture have been studied in various disciplines. Their important bearing on communication courses gives rise to some major concerns regarding the introduction of communication courses into China:

1. How sensitive the lecturer (communication specialist) should be to differences between American and Chinese cultures?

A thorough understanding of both cultures is preferable if possible, but the awareness that differences exists is more important than knowledge of one or two differences already described. The courses to be introduced are, after all, of communication in English, and the students are English learners. It is part of their job to know

something about the native culture. On the other hand, some of the things taken for granted in America might be difficult to understand in China. The principles listed earlier might present some difficulty for Chinese students to appreciate. Their problem would first of all be "why?" The lecturer as well as small class teachers should encourage the students to raise such questions and turn them into useful discussions about the cultural differences.

2. How class activities are affected by cultural differences?

Organization of class activities probably are more important when we consider cultural differences, for students rarely if ever question organizational assumptions as they do subject content. For example, in America, the usually welcome arrangement of dyadic encounters is to pair a male with a female. But if you adopt this arrangement in China, you might notice many quiet groups, for it is unusual for a female student to disclose her emotions to a male she hardly knows, but it is inappropriate, too, for her to question a decision made by the teacher. The result? She would most likely keep quiet. In conducting small-performance class, the teacher needs to be more sensitive to cultural differences. In this respect, the co-operative working system in China might help: the teachers (or graduate assistants) may bring their problems together to find a solution.

3. Is it more desirable to compile textbooks specially for the Chinese students?

Yes, if there is enough time and resources. The advantage is obvious. Chinese students who have just begun to study English have a

very limited vocabulary. They also will have limited opportunities to have certain forms of communication in English, for example, family communication (or very intimate communication), and they always have their own cultural background and native language in their mind. To cater to all those special needs, a new textbook especially compiled for the Chinese students might help to alleviate the burden of the lecturer and the teachers.

Nevertheless, it will not be a fatal mistake to use some well-established textbooks. Their rich material and carefully designed activities may compound some of the disadvantages. What is more important, the cultural differences will have to be brought up in class. Textbooks compiled for native speakers are full of cultural assumptions. Once the students have been alerted to the fact, they will probably gain more by careful observation and comparison between what they have read and what they have experienced in their own culture. The important thing, though, is to be aware of the disadvantages brought by such textbooks and turn them to positive use in class.

Conclusion

The introduction of basic-communication courses into China's foreign-language curriculum is a necessary change required by the changed goal of foreign-language teaching in China. These courses are to be integrated with language training to enable students to gain adequate communicative competence. To effect a smooth change, it is necessary to base the new communication courses on what has already

existed in the curriculum, to use large lecture plus small performance class as a major form of organization, to obtain good textbooks, including programmed-instruction textbooks to capitalize on students' initiative, and to keep a research orientation from the very beginning. The major concerns of the introduction arise from cultural differences which are often reflected in communication courses. This does not mean that English communication courses will have to teach Chinese norms. The important thing is for the lecturer as well as small-class teachers to be sensitive to such reflections and give the students opportunities to ask questions about some of the assumptions in these courses. Organizational problems caused by cultural differences, however, will have to be solved differently, for it is rare if ever for students in China to question organizational principles or their underlying assumptions. To bring collective working practices in China to the solution of this problem is feasible and may be effective. Teaching materials will have to be compiled specially for Chinese students in the long run, but at present, use of American textbooks is not a bad alternative. To test the feasibility of this proposal, more detailed research into the education system in China and the methodology of teaching English to Chinese students will have to be made.

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